

Women students unaware of lifestyle links to cancer

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LONDON (Reuters) - Most female students are unaware that lifestyle factors can influence their risk of developing breast cancer, according to a survey released on Monday.

A poll of more than 10,000 students in 23 countries showed more than half knew heredity was a risk factor. But less than five percent realized that eating and drinking too much alcohol and not getting enough exercise also had an impact.

"It is very worrying that information about being overweight, having a high alcohol intake and taking little exercise has simply not been effectively communicated to young women in any of the countries we surveyed," Professor Jane Wardle, of the charity Cancer Research UK, who headed the research team, said.

American students were the most aware that lifestyle could place a role in breast cancer.

Ten percent of Americans questioned in the poll published in the European Journal of Cancer knew alcohol was a risk factor compared to four percent in England, which was less than in Greece, Spain and Colombia.

Female students in Iceland, Ireland, Greece and South America were better informed about the link between lack of exercise and breast cancer than English students.

"The results of this study suggest that students could be overestimating the impact of genetic factors and are certainly underestimating the importance of lifestyle factors," Wardle added.

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women. More than a million cases occur worldwide each year, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer in Lyon, France.

The disease develops most often in older women. Factors which can also increase a woman's risk of the breast cancer include having a mother or close relative with the disease, early puberty, late menopause and not having any children.

The contraceptive pill and hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after the menopause may also cause an increase in risk but it gradually returns to normal once a woman stops taking them.

Students in countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and North and South America took part in the study.